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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 002880

SIPDIS

STATE FOR P AND SA

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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR U/S BURNS'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH

REF: A. DHAKA 02666

[B](#). DHAKA 02610

[C](#). DHAKA 02619

[D](#). DHAKA 02409

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 b,d.

[1](#). (C) As the most senior State official to visit Bangladesh since Secretary Powell in 2003, you will be warmly received by Bangladeshis and the BDG. Dynamic but chaotic, Bangladesh defies easy generalizations about its nature or future. Nevertheless, most trends are negative.

Politics: The Art of the Dysfunctional

[2](#). (C) Virtually every Bangladeshi problem -- from poor governance to an under-performing economy to its potential as a breeding ground for terrorism -- stems from a dysfunctional political system that smothers innovation, accountability, and a long-term national outlook. The opposition Awami League (AL) and the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are family-run enterprises fixated on power, history, money, and mutual animosity. Democracy is valued as a legacy of independence, but for most Bangladeshis democratic practice stops at voting. Decision-making is ad hoc and driven by proximity to leaders, not institutions or even interest groups. The next general election is expected in January 2007 and will be the most monitored in Bangladesh's history. A failed election, with no broadly accepted outcome, could be devastating for Bangladesh and key USG interests.

[3](#). (C) The AL blames the ruling BNP for a series of sometimes fatal attacks on opposition figures as part of an alleged plot to rig the next election. It insists on early elections but not before major changes in the country's much-admired caretaker (interim) government system that it knows the BNP, which has a huge parliamentary majority, will never accept. It is progressively opting out of the political process by, inter alia, boycotting by-elections and parliament (ref A). The AL is divided on its implied threat to boycott the general election.

[4](#). (C) The BNP, under the direction of Tarique Rahman, the PM's controversial son and heir apparent, is increasingly preoccupied with preparing for the election and, it seems, doing whatever it can get away with to win (ref B). In early June, the heavy-handed arrest and treatment of former President Ershad's now ex-wife underscored PMO paranoia of a coalescing opposition (ref C).

[5](#). (C) The AL has failed to find an issue to generate momentum against a government whose most popular action in three years is the creation of the Rapid Action Battalion and its thinly veiled policy of extra-judicially killing alleged criminals. However, the AL still has unmatched national organizational strength, and it could benefit from traditional anti-incumbent sentiments, especially if it builds better political partnerships, capitalizes on popular dismay over rising fuel and food prices, and exploits apprehensions about violence, religious extremism, corruption, and the PM's son.

Political Islam

[6](#). (C) BNP leaders believe they need the support of Jamaat Islami (JI), the country's biggest Islamist party, to win marginal constituencies and beat the AL. Their alliance is based solely on mutual expedience. JI says BNP is the "lesser of two evils," while BNP says JI can be constrained and co-opted inside government. JI's leader told us he'll demand 50 tickets from BNP in the next election; the BNP insists it'll hold the line to keep JI's representation in parliament near its current total of 17.

7, (C) Political Islam is vertically integrated with its own banks, NGO's, student coaching centers, health care facilities, businesses, media, a violent youth wing, and a mainstream political party--Jamaat Islami. JI works hard to convince us that it is committed to democratic constitutionalism and minority rights. Ironically, it's the only party in Bangladesh to practice internal democracy,

reward merit, be relatively non-corrupt, and, critically, have a ideological vision that it pursues with discipline. JI says it aspires to real political power after two or three elections. Failure by the mainstream parties to rehabilitate themselves creates a vacuum JI is increasingly poised to fill.

18. (C) There is a widening split between JI and other Islamist groups, including fellow coalition partner IOJ, driven by ideology, personalities, and envy (ref D). IOJ elements might abandon the coalition, though their contribution was largely a facade of Islamist unity, not voters. Islamist groups have a predominantly domestic focus for historical and other reasons; demonstrations against alleged USG desecration of the Quran were relatively modest. Also, Islamist violence continues to target other Muslims using low-grade weapons and tactics. However, the ingredients for terrorism -- corruption, porous borders, ineffective security forces, sympathetic local elements -- exist and could combust if political volatility and violence are not controlled.

#### Political Violence -----

19. (C) Political violence traditionally peaks in the run-up and aftermath of national elections. In 2004, it claimed 246 lives, but in the election year of 2001 the figure was 1494. The new trend in the past two years, however, is the targeting of high-profile opposition and "liberal" civil society leaders. Until recently, the BDG had failed to bring any of the culprits to justice, fanning speculation it condoned the violence. Significantly, the assassins of AL MPs Ahsanullah Master and Shah Kibria are tied to the BNP, not Islamists working in cahoots with the BNP as claimed by the AL. Since the BDG in February banned two Islamist groups charged with attacking two Bangladeshi development NGO's, there has been a sharp drop in political violence. Getting a handle on political violence is critical for the 2007 election.

#### Human Rights -----

10. (C) Strong traditions of free speech, robust elections, and a lively if unprofessional free press are mitigated by serious problems with police abuses, harsh treatment of women and children, and victimization of religious minorities, especially at election times. Respect for democratic concepts is skin deep, in and out of government. Faced with the specter of U.S. sanctions on trafficking in persons, the BDG last year acted quickly on several fronts to earn a Tier II rating in 2005. We have repeatedly raised at senior levels our objections to thinly-veiled extra-judicial killings by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and other police units, noting Leahy amendment implications for the military officers seconded to RAB. After a steep drop in spring, "cross-fire" killings rebounded sharply in May to reach 179 (37 from RAB) as of June 12. The BDG says that the sensitivities and needs of the majority should not be sacrificed for the needs of a few, in this case "criminals" -- the same logic invoked to justify the BDG's ban in January 2004 of Ahmadiya publications.

#### India -----

11. (C) India is Bangladesh's most important neighbor but their relationship is a comfort to neither. Trade, most of it illicit, is significant but far below its potential. Water sharing, illegal migrants, alleged Indian insurgent camps in Bangladesh, alleged GOI sanctuary for Bangladeshi criminals in India, and periodic border clashes are all recurring themes. The AL's close ties to the GOI, real and perceived, are a serious political liability for the AL. The BDG believes that India manipulates foreign and Bangladeshi media reporting to support the AL's projection of Bangladesh as a failing, Talibanizing state. In the run-up to this week's Foreign Secretary talks in New Delhi, BDG security forces made two raids in border areas to kill and arrest alleged Indian insurgents -- a first in recent memory -- though officially the BDG maintains there is no regular insurgent presence in Bangladesh. The official, but unreleased, BDG inquiry into the August 21 grenade attack that killed 23 persons at an AL rally blamed India; recent developments, including the recall of Interpol personnel to Dhaka, indicate the BDG is again pursuing that line of inquiry.

#### U.S. Relationship -----

12. (C) Because of the U.S.'s global status, our strong trading and people-to-people ties, and potential USG leverage with India and China, any BDG puts a premium on a visibly healthy relationship with Washington. The BDG is therefore susceptible to pressure if the issue, like TIP, doesn't

jeopardize a core political interest. The BDG believes that the geographical breadth of its commercial and political relationships, along with the declining donor percentage of its development budget, shield it from foreign pressure.

#### Suggested Themes/Points for Meetings

##### 13. (C) For BDG:

-- Congratulations on Bangladesh's historic cricket victory against Australia. Beating the best is always satisfying, especially when people were saying Bangladesh didn't belong in top-flight (test) cricket.

-- I'm visiting Bangladesh early to underscore the USG's continuing interest in Bangladesh, its commitment to our broad partnership, and concerns about common problems like terrorism, corruption, and political violence.

-- Greatly appreciate BDG's leadership in international peacekeeping (new deployments to Sudan).

-- Appreciate your cooperation with FBI on the Kibria case. You promised us full cooperation and you delivered. We look forward to continued progress in this area.

-- Appreciate your work to update your criminal code to facilitate investigations and prosecutions of terrorism.

-- Welcome your support for eight more UN CT conventions. When will Parliament ratify? Positive action on the remaining UN CT convention, on terrorist financing, is also important.

-- Know you want Millennium Challenge Account status, but a clear, concerted government commitment to combat corruption is critical. Last week's resignation of the Energy Minister of State because of his acceptance of a luxury vehicle from a foreign (Canadian) oil company sent a positive signal, but more is needed.

-- Very concerned by the sharp increase in extra-judicial "cross-fire" killings. Know that Ambassador Thomas has explained Leahy amendment implications to you. Continued killings and implementation of Leahy sanctions would undermine a broad range of Bangladeshi interests in the U.S. Congress.

-- Like you, we want free and fair elections. We welcome the successful election in Chittagong, which saw the re-election of a mayor from the opposition; he is no friend of the USG but his victory was good for democracy. Our focus is on how the political process operates, and whether the opposition is allowed to play its democratic role free of harassment and other constraints. Containing political violence is essential. We tell the opposition they should exercise and defend their democratic rights, not surrender them.

##### For JI:

-- Concerned by anti-Ahmadiya attacks. We'd welcome explicit condemnation from JI on violence and attacks on religious freedom.

-- How does JI view the 2007 election? How many seats does it hope to win?

-- What are the BDG's successes and failures in government? How would JI do better?

##### For AL:

-- We understand the importance of the next election. We are watching the process closely and will react sharply against attempts to obstruct legitimate opposition activity.

-- Therefore, we are concerned by AL's steady opting out of the political process, by boycotting by-elections and parliament. Democratic rights should be exercised and defended, not surrendered.

##### Watch Out for from BDG

##### 14. (C)

-- The USG should support duty-free access for Bangladesh to the U.S. garment market to prevent hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi women from losing their jobs with the end of MFA quotas. Bangladesh is democratic, moderate, and poor. It deserves your help so it can compete with communist China. (Note: There are many steps Bangladesh can take to improve its competitiveness: reduce corruption, cut Chittagong port's high costs and long delays, improve infrastructure, cut delivery times, and diversify exports.)

-- The USG should, as a matter of policy, support Bangladesh

for MCA.

-- The USG should pressure the AL to rejoin the democratic process.

-- PM Zia would like to meet with POTUS/visit Washington.  
THOMAS